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[DIRECTIONS](#) [CONTACTS](#) [PENN](#) [HOME](#)



No. 58 - Fall 2003

[PDF version of this issue](#)

In This Issue

[A Message from the Dean](#)

[Class of 2007 Alumni Legacy Students](#)

[Alumni and Friends Celebrate in the Big Apple](#)

[Teaching and Research Building News](#)

[Cover Story
A Day in the Life of a Field Service Team](#)

[New Members of the Board of Overseers](#)

[Walter E. Goodman Honored](#)

[An Evening in Old Philadelphia
Check Presentation](#)

[Correction](#)

[NBC's Radiology Adds Large Digital Sensor Panel](#)

[Term Chair Established for Special Species Medicine](#)

[Augustus Lushington, Class of 1897](#)

[A Canary in a Coal Mine:
The Connection Between Animal Abuse and Human Violence](#)

[Coming to the Ryan Veterinary Hospital in January: Hemodialysis](#)

[Improving Survival Rate of Cloned Mouse Embryos](#)

[Pfizer Animal Health Gift](#)

[Volunteers Needed to Foal Sit](#)

Canary in a Coal Mine: The Connection Between Animal Abuse and Human Violence

By Susan I. Finkelstein

Animals have long served as prognosticators of disease and toxins in the environment. For centuries, canaries were brought into coal mines to alert miners to carbon monoxide; if the birds died, the miners quickly evacuated. Today, scientists regard reductions and mutations in the populations of frogs and other amphibians as first signs that other species or an entire habitat might be in jeopardy.

Recently, evidence has indicated that animals can play a similar role with interpersonal violence. Psychology, sociology, and criminology studies conducted in the last quarter-century have shown that many violent offenders repeatedly committed acts of serious animal cruelty during childhood and adolescence. Other research has demonstrated consistent patterns of animal cruelty among perpetrators of common forms of violence, including child abuse, spouse abuse, and elder abuse. Recognition of these patterns may help human service professionals make life-saving decisions related to suspected instances of family violence when animal abuse is also evident.

Such was the subject of a Continuing Education course held on campus in October, "Interpersonal Violence and Animal Abuse," co-sponsored by the Vet School and the School of Social Work. Jodi A. Levinthal, M.S.W., a doctoral candidate in Social Welfare at Penn, organized and led the interactive workshop, along with Phil Arkow, humane educator and chair of the Latham Foundation's Child and Family Violence Prevention Project. Ms. Levinthal is also a member of the Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society (CIAS), a multidisciplinary research center within the Vet School that provides a forum for addressing the many practical and moral issues arising from the interactions of animals and society. (The CIAS addressed the animal abuse/interpersonal violence issue in 1998, with its sponsorship of the Third Interdisciplinary Conference on Human Relations with Animals and the Natural World, "The Cruelty Connection: The Links between Animal Abuse, Child Abuse, and Family Violence.")

Arkow presented striking evidence for a link between animal cruelty and human violence in the case histories of some of the twentieth century's most heinous murderers. David Berkowitz, known as "Son of Sam," shot a neighbor's Labrador retriever before committing his murders. As a child, future serial killer and cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer killed neighborhood pets and impaled animals' heads on sticks. More recently, before Columbine High School students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot and killed 14 classmates and a teacher (and fatally shot themselves), they had bragged about mutilating animals to their friends.

Less dramatic but no less critical is the connection between animal abuse and family violence—"The Link," as it is called in social work circles. "Family violence often begins with pet abuse," notes Arkow. Abusive family members may threaten, injure, or kill pets, often as a way of threatening or controlling others in the family. According to the 2002 Report of Animal Cruelty Cases published by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), approximately 12 percent of the reported intentional animal cruelty cases also involved some form of family violence, including domestic violence, child abuse, spouse/child witnessing animal cruelty, or elder abuse.

[New Horses for the Carriage Program](#)

[Rosettes & Ribbons \(some recent accomplishments of note at the School\)](#)

[Tucker Battles Tetanus—And Wins!](#)

[Eastern Veterinary Historical Society](#)

[Animal Crackers](#)

[Special Gifts to the School](#)

["Take a Seat" Campaign](#)

[Dedication of the Matthew J. Ryan Veterinary Hospital](#)

[VMD Notes](#)

[Family Weaves Golden Thread Amidst Tragedy](#)

[President's Message](#)

[VMAS Executive Board/Nestle Purina Happy Hour](#)

[Treating Sick Animals and Many a Sweet Tooth](#)

[2004 Alumni Award of Merit Nominations Sought](#)

[Class Notes](#)

[Alumni Connections](#)

Interestingly, the parent is not always the one hurting the animal. Children who abuse animals may be repeating behavior seen at home; like their parents, they too are reacting to anger or frustration with violence. Children in violent homes frequently participate in "pecking-order battering," in which they may maim or kill an animal, the only member of the household more powerless than they are. Indeed, domestic violence or neglect is the most common background for childhood cruelty to animals. Ms. Levinthal related a case in which she witnessed a child attempting to strangle a kitten during a home visit; that act led to several other revelations that ultimately confirmed her suspicions—the single mother was addicted to drugs and posed a threat to her children.

And yet, despite all the statistics, case studies, psychologists, and even FBI profilers consistently reaffirming "The Link," animal abuse crimes are not given nearly the weight in the criminal justice system that human crimes are given. In 1997, in an attempt to raise public and professional awareness about the animal cruelty/human violence connection, the HSUS created the "First Strike" campaign, which aims to strengthen collaboration among animal shelter workers, animal control officers, social service workers, law enforcement officials, veterinarians, educators, and others to establish strategies to reduce animal cruelty and family and community violence.

Indeed, professionals who help families in crisis have already begun realizing the role animals play in family violence. Many law enforcement agencies now are training officers responding to domestic violence calls how to recognize signs that a situation is life threatening: instances where the abuser has threatened suicide, is displaying a firearm, or has hurt or killed a family pet.

Additionally, domestic violence shelters, veterinarians, kennels, and local animal welfare organizations have started working together to develop "safe havens" for the pets of domestic violence victims. Many victims delay leaving the batterer out of fear for their pets' safety, but with more than 100 Safe Haven for Pets programs now operating around the country, many domestic violence victims no longer have to choose between their well-being and their pets. Under the various programs, shelters actually house the pets with their owners on a temporary basis, find space for the animals at local kennels, or recruit volunteers to act as "foster parents" for the endangered pets while their owners seek medical attention, counseling, and other help.

Increasing awareness levels have indeed made a difference in the past ten years: the evidence that cruelty toward animals is indicative of other violent behaviors has been so overwhelming that 41 states and the District of Columbia currently have felony-level convictions for serious acts of animal abuse. Still, some law enforcement officials and social service workers say that putting greater emphasis on animal abuse is impractical, given all the other crimes and cases they must respectively handle. "Animal abuse must be redefined as a crime of violence rather than a crime against property," counters Arkow. "It must be perceived and documented as a human welfare issue. The network of community caregivers must be cross-trained to recognize and report all forms of violence."

Authorities often discover animal abuse earlier than child or domestic abuse because it usually occurs in plain view. While hiding their own abuse, human victims may talk openly of animal abuse or neglect occurring in the family. Since legislation governing animal abuse and child abuse investigation and intervention are different, animal control agents often enter homes when social service workers cannot. Working together through cross-reporting, these agencies can help each other gain information about abusive situations and end cycles of violence that often have tragic results.